APPOINTMENT AFTER DARK
January 24, 2010

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Psalm 19
John 1: 1-5, 14
John 3: 1-21

"How can anyone be born after having grown old?" John 3:4 (NRSV)

"Jesus said: 'I'm telling you like it is . . . God's got such a thing for this loused-up planet that he's sent me down so if you don't believe your own eyes, then maybe you'll believe mine, maybe you'll believe me, maybe you won't come sneaking around scared half to death in the dark anymore but will come to, come clean, come to *life*.'"

Frederick Buechner
"Nicodemus"
Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who

Your spirit, like the wind, blows where it will. So keep us awake and alert and brave enough to be stirred and transformed by that spirit. Startle us – with love big enough, strong enough, gentle enough to make us into new people, reborn lovers and followers of Jesus. Amen.

I've always wondered if Ernest Hemingway, whose writing was often tantalizingly theological, had the 3rd chapter of the Gospel with John with its imagery of light and dark and a man walking into darkness in mind when he wrote a short story, *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.* In that story, which I read years ago but for some reason have not forgotten, an old man sits in a Paris café at night, alone, drinking brandy. It's late. Two waiters speculate about why he is there, why he is alone, and why the old man won't leave. One waiter is young, impatient. He wishes the old man would die, or at least go home. "I wouldn't want to be that old" he says. "An old man is a nasty thing," and refuses the old man another brandy.

The other waiter, older, is more patient. "Why did you not let him stay?" he asks. "I am of those who like to stay late at the café . . . With all those who need a light for the night" (*The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, p. 379-383).

Hemingway's *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* has fixed itself in my mind over the years and I have concluded that it is because of its similarity to one of the best known stories in the Bible, the story of Nicodemus who comes to Jesus at night and their subsequent night-time conversation. It is in that

conversation that Jesus used the phrase “born from above” which can also be translated “born anew” and which becomes in popular religious vernacular “born again.” And it is also in that story, that the writer adds a comment which is the most familiar biblical verse of all - John 3: 16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” If you only know one Bible verse, that’s the one to know. It’s all there. Martin Luther called John 3: 16 “the Gospel in miniature.” The popularity of that verse is due in no small part to the antics of a peculiar young man with multi-colored hair who used to show up at every major football game, seated strategically in the end zone so that coverage of every touchdown and extra point would also include him and the sign he always held, announcing simply “John 3: 16.” I haven’t seen him for a while and have missed him so I did a little research. Actually, I asked John Vest who follows sports events as closely as I do, and John got on his computer and in a few minutes produced a complete report. Rollen Frederick Stewart is his name, known also as “Rainbow Man,” a born-again Christian who decided to “get out the message” and did so by showing up at major sporting events: Major League Baseball All Star Games, NFL games - always behind the goal post, the Olympic Games and the Indianapolis 500. I always wondered how he managed that, with a little envy I suppose, not the John 3:16 business I’m ashamed to admit, but being present at all those great sporting events. John Vest’s report concluded unhappily: Rainbow Man is not at an NFL playoff game this afternoon because he’s in jail. But, he has would-be successors, I am told, without the hair - none of which has anything to do with the sermon, but when you have this kind of material you should share it.

It is an important story and it is the second of the incidents, or encounters, with Jesus, in the Gospel of John. The fourth Gospel tells stories that do not appear in Matthew, Mark and Luke - the Synoptic Gospels. John’s stories are unique and memorable and introduce us to some fascinating people.

At the beginning of John’s account of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus, who John announces is “the Word Made Flesh,” there is a baptism, a story about a wedding and 180 gallons of water Jesus turned into wine. And the next thing that happens after these introductory stories is a nighttime visit and conversation.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, and a member of the highest Jewish governmental body allowed to keep functioning by the Romans, the Sanhedrin. He’s a recognized, reputable leader in the city, a man respected and admired. He comes to Jesus at night, we assume, so that he won’t be seen and recognized talking to a young man some are calling the Messiah, and who has created quite a stir by walking into the Temple and driving out

the moneychangers. It can't have been a good idea for a man like Nicodemus to be seen, in broad daylight, talking to Jesus.

He begins graciously, with a compliment. He calls him "Rabbi." "We know God is with you: we've heard about the signs you are performing - the wedding in Cana. No one can do things like that without God's help."

Jesus responds "No one sees the Kingdom of God without being born from above - or born anew - or born again." It's not exactly an answer to a question Nicodemus asked. It's rather a whole new direction Jesus wants to go with Nicodemus.

Poor Nicodemus, with all his theological sophistication, his social status, his honorary degrees - he has absolutely no imagination. He doesn't recognize a metaphor when he bumps into it. In fact, Nicodemus is the first fundamentalist in history. He's a literalist. "How can anyone be born after growing old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb?" That's the kind of mental gymnastics and physical gymnastics, in this case, you have to perform if you are a literalist.

Frederick Buechner has a little fun with Nicodemus . . . wondering about entering the womb again in his old age . . . "Just how was he supposed to pull a thing like that off . . . when you are pushing 65 and it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning? Could a man enter a second time into his mother's womb when it was all he could do to enter a taxi without the drivers coming around to give him a shove from behind?" (*Peculiar Treasures, A Biblical Who's Who*, p. 122).

Jesus keeps on talking, using what one commentator points out, a stunning series of feminine images for God that we mostly overlook - womb, water, spirit - which in the Greek John is using is a feminine noun. And it concludes with John's editorial observation on the whole Nicodemus matter - "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son. . . ." (the way I memorized it – "that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.")

The Biblical scholars remind us that we read the Bible through our own set of lenses. Most of us read the Bible through the lens of masculine images for God and pretty much miss the feminine images for God because that is what we were taught. I caught myself at it. I realized that every time I have preached a sermon on this text (and over the decades you do every three years or so) every time in the past I have described Nicodemus as either a young adult or middle-aged. In fact I've built sermons on that reading - in the early years, Nicodemus as an up and coming young adult, struggling with his value system and his vocation. Then Nicodemus in middle age, having a mid-life crisis, struggling with his identity and the

purpose of his life. Over the years Nicodemus, (guess what?), as I have, has been growing older, putting on years. He's a Senior now. The lens through which I read the Bible has, in the past, blotted out something Nicodemus says . . . "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" How much clearer can it be than that? He's not a young adult, he's not middle-aged. He is, pardon the expression - "old."

And, suddenly I'm seeing him more clearly. He's settled. He's certain. He's sure of himself, his accomplishments, his life-time of devotion to his nation, his religion and its law. He's thinking about retirement, he's still very much alive intellectually and spiritually but not planning new adventures, projects. That's who comes to Jesus. That's the man Jesus says must be born anew.

Now, we have problems, do we not, with that phrase "born again?" "Are you born again?" We are asked by the street corner evangelist, the television preacher, maybe even a good friend. College football phenomenon Tim Tebow regularly announces proudly his "born again" status. William Sloane Coffin told the story of the privileged and proper Boston matron who, when she heard the words "you must be born again" reportedly sniffed: "When you are born in Boston it's quite enough. You don't need to be born again" (See *Collected Sermons, Vol. I,* "Jesus and Nicodemus," p. 507). Someone quipped that "are you born again?" is the most terrifying question you can ask a Presbyterian. It is a rallying cry, a code word, for a brand of evangelicalism that is not only outside our comfort zone, but with which we do not always agree. "Are you born again?" sometimes sounds like "I am and you, clearly, are not, and you're in a lot of trouble." We associate "born again Christian" with theological certainty, with having answers for all the questions: why Haiti and not the Dominican Republic; the question of abortion, a complex question about which "born-agains" seem absolutely certain. The same for gay ordination, gay rights, gay marriage. No nuance, no appreciation of human complexity, no openness to newness – led by the Spirit which Jesus says blows where it wills, but absolute, unchanging certainty. It is theological exclusivity which excludes from the Kingdom a lot - in fact, most - of the human race.

I believe that is a wrong interpretation of the phrase "born anew." Jesus did not say you must be sure of yourself, certain, tough with ready answers for every question. He didn't say you have to graduate from seminary or Moody Bible Institute and have at your fingertips a Bible verse suitable for every occasion. Instead, he said the most remarkable thing: You must be born anew – which means – I presume, like a baby.

I'm no expert but I know a little bit about babies. We've had five and 13 grandchildren. I baptize a dozen or so every month, hold them in my arms. What newborns know is pretty basic: I'm hungry, I'm cold. I'm wet.

I want someone to hold me, maybe not that man in a black robe. That's about it. Newborns are vulnerable: newborns look at the world literally with new eyes, with eyes open to the wonder of things: food, warmth, comforting music and a mother's loving face. Most of all, newborns trust - trust the world to be kind and life-giving. Could it be that vulnerable love and wide-eyed wonder and trust is what Jesus meant when he said such an unlikely, startling, provocative thing: "You must be born again?"

In a new book, *The Gift of Years*, Joan Chittister, Benediction sister, bestselling author, who turned 70 recently, wrote: "The task of this period of life is not simply to endure the coming of the end of time. It is to come alive in ways I have never been alive before . . . "I begin to see the world differently. It is to be treasured, to be explored, to be enjoyed."

And then this statement that made me think of old Nicodemus coming to Jesus: "the number of absolutes in my life is precipitously reduced. I'm a lot less dogmatic about the nature of God. I'm not as sure as I once was about what is gravely damning and what is not. Most important of all, I am happy to put that decision in the hands of God whose nature seems far more compassionate now" (p. 42).

"You must be born again" means you must be open the movement of the spirit, like the blowing of the wind, open to growth and change, even in your most deeply held convictions.

"You must be born again" means you must see the world as if for the first time, become open to the newness and beauty and goodness all around you.

To be born again means to love passionately, to love life and the beloved people God has given you to love, to love your nation, your city, your neighbors, the ones who need you, your children, to love God with childlike wonder and grace.

And it is to trust God with your life, your future, whatever you are facing this morning - completely, just as a newborn trusts her/his mother, father, caregiver."

Nicodemus, in his old age, came to see Jesus. And Jesus, challenged Nicodemus to open his eyes and ears and mind and heart: challenged Nicodemus not to start packing it in, but to be alive, to be born anew.

I think it was an invitation. Nicodemus knew about Jesus, admired Jesus, but kept his distance, came to see Jesus after dark. Jesus, I think, was inviting Nicodemus to move from the company of admirers, the intellectually curious, and become a follower (see William Sloane Coffin) to

stand up and be counted, to declare and follow Jesus publically, politically, socially, economically, to become Jesus' man.

I think that conversation with Jesus challenged Nicodemus deeply and set off a struggle - a three-year journey - at the very time of his life he should be settling in, relaxing, sitting at home enjoying the fruits of his labor. I think it set Nicodemus to struggling and three years later, he finally did, stood up to be counted, identified himself with Jesus in a way no one could miss or misunderstand.

John tells us that three years later, on the very day Jesus was crucified, after he was dead, two men - with great courage and at great risk - came to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, and asked for the body of Jesus and took it down from the cross, and anointed it with precious oils one of them had brought along, and buried the body in a garden tomb. One of the men was Joseph of Arimathea and the other Nicodemus - who was born anew, born again, because this time it was daylight and he was alive as he never had been before.

Amen